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ABSTRACT

The author considers one section of a document (Everyone's Favorite Solution in "The Reserve Army of the Underemployed") by James O'Toole to be an attack on vocational education in which seven charges are made. The charges are rebutted with the intention of illustrating the positive contributions that vocational education can make to the goals of career education. It is noted that any long-run strategy (for solving the education/work dilemma in general, or the problems of the underemployed in particular) that ignores or fails to take full advantage of vocational education will be both unwise and unproductive. Vocational education is not viewed as the sole answer, but as an essential element in a total career education strategy since, according to the author, the career education concept would never be made an operational reality unless all concerned with this movement recognize and embrace the goals and objectives of vocational education. (TA)

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"EVERYONE'S FAVORITE SOLUTION" CAN'T BE ALL BAD: A REPLY TO JAMES O'TOOLE

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Introduction

As part of a series entitled MONOGRAPHS IN CAREER EDUCATION, the Office of Career Education, United States Office of Education, recently published a document authored by Dr. James O'Toole, University of Southern California, entitled The Reserve Army of the Underemployed. Like all other monographs in this series, it is the sole work of the author and carries no official endorsement of the United States Office of Education.

I am personally pleased that this monograph has been published. In my opinion, it is a thoughtful and provocative discussion of one of the major social problems of our time - namely, that of underemployment among persons in the labor force. O'Toole has put the problem in both a national and international perspective. Without proposing a single or any simple solution, he has discussed several alternative, long-run strategies that might be considered. It is a document well worth reading and deserving of serious study.

While generally positive in picturing various possible solutions to the problem, O'Toole has chosen, in one section of the monograph carrying a heading "Everyone's Favorite Solution," to launch a vigorous attack on vocational education. While, of course, I defend his right to do so, my personal opinions on this matter differ sharply from O'Toole's. Thus, I feel a strong need to express my views here.

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O'Toole's general position, as expressed in this monograph, is illustrated by the following quotes:

> "...everyone's favorite solution - the extension of vocational education - is probably the worst policy to pursue to meet the problems of underemployment."

> "The disparity between the expectations of the young and the realities of the labor market can be most readily, thoroughly, and disastrously resolved through a massive program of vocational education."

He then attempts to defend this position by raising even specific charges against vocational education. It is these seven charges that I would like to reply to here. In doing so, I speak as one involved in career education, not as a vocational educator per se. I hope and expect that professional vocational educators will formulate a different set of responses based on their knowledge of vocational education. What I have to say here stems primarily from my conviction that career education, if it is to meet its responsibilities for contributing to solutions in the area of underemployment, will require a strengthening, not a weakening, of vocational education. Thus, my replies here are intended to illustrate the positive contributions vocational education can make to the goals of career education. It is probably safe to say that O'Toole and I are equally biased about vocational education - but from opposite points.

Charge 1: A Second Class Education for Second Class Citizens

The following two quotes from O'Toole's monograph illustrate this charge:

"....systems of second-class education for second-class citizens have lowered the expectations and self-esteem of disadvantaged groups and left them willing hewers, drawers and toilers."

"....(vocational training) is correctly viewed today as an undemocratic anachronism, a way of preserving a dual form of education - one stream for "gentlemen" the other for "ruffians"....The educational track that one gets into at an early age largely determines one's occupational future and social class standing."

From a career education perspective, three points must be made clearly and forcefully in response to this charge. First, it is our goal to help all persons view vocational education as a different kind of educational opportunity, not as one of inferior quality. Vocational education is properly viewed as a means of recognizing that students differ in educational motivations - in what will "turn them on" as learners - and that a system of universal public education has an inescapable responsibility of providing for such differences.

Second, career education seeks to make vocational education a real choice for all students. It certainly was never intended to simply serve the "ruffians." I would defy anyone to study today's high school students and classify those in the college prep curriculum as "gentlemen " and those in vocational education as "ruffians." Any who truly believe otherwise should be encouraged to attend a local, State, or national meeting of any of the vocational youth clubs associated with vocational education. Such clubs, to me, represent the very best qualities of American citizenship in their student membership. Every sign of future direction that I can see in

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vocational education points in a direction of opening up opportunities to choose vocational education for all students.

Third, it simply is not true that, by choosing vocational education, a student limits his or her occupational future and social class standing. In the first place, vocational education, by appealing to educational motivations of many previously unmotivated persons, has encouraged such persons to complete high school and to continue their education beyond high school. In the second place, several high school vocational education programs - including vocational agriculture, home economics, business and office occupations, and distributive education - are purposely structured around a career development mode that makes it logical for many of their graduates to enter colleges and universities after finishing high school. Third, there are relatively few postsecondary institutions today who systematically deny entrance to graduates of high school vocational education programs - and this trend is accelerating. Thus, from a career education standpoint, I can see no way that, by virtue of enrolling in vocational education, a person necessarily limits his or her occupational future or social class status.

Charge 2: Vocational Education Seeks to Create a Dual System of Education

O'Toole's charge here is illustrated by the following quotes:

"On the east side of the Atlantic, the integration of vocational and academic tracks, and of working and middle-class students, is the primary goal of educational reform. Contrarily, in America, we are about to embark on the re-creation of the kind of dual system from

which the Europeans are just now painfully extracting themselves. Next year, a major Vocational Education bill will waltz through the Congress with nary a dissenting vote,..."

Here, of course, he is referring to the international trend toward using a career education approach as an avenue for educational reform and contending that vocational education is working in ways that contradict support of a career education strategy. Again, the record is clear in illustrating vocational education's concern for career education to be just the opposite.

No segment of American education has been as supportive of career education as has vocational education. Vocational education has, both through dollars and by official policy formulation, been supportive of the career education concept from the beginning. Career education's efforts to bridge the gap between academic and vocational education have been fully and vigorously supported by vocational education. Had the same degree of support been given career education by all other parts of education, that gap would already have been greatly narrowed.

Finally, on this point, it should be made clear that the major piece of current vocational education legislation supported by professional vocational educators - H.R. 3037 - contains one separate title supporting career education. In addition, in several places, provisions are made, in that bill, for accommodating both academic and vocational education students. Instead of calling for a "dual system of education," it goes far in providing a basis for closer and more effective working relationships between academic and vocational education.

Charge 3: Vocational Education Grads Do Poorly in the Labor Market

The specific charge being leveled at vocational education here is stated in the following terms:

> "...the initial employment record of vocational graduates in terms of income, job status, turnover, upward mobility, unemployment rates, and job satisfaction is no better than for students in academic programs and, in the long run, is much worse."

As the basis for this charge, O'Toole refers to "an evaluation conducted for the Work in America study by Beatrice Reubens. The first thing to be said here is that, in reading Work in America, I have never been able to identify the specific references nor see the specific evidence on which this charge is based. I understand that Reubens has collected some evidence justifying a conclusion that graduates of two-year postsecondary occupational education programs do better than graduates of high school programs. Certainly, to show that students who are two years older and who have been given two more years of vocational education do better than youth who just graduated from high school could not be regarded, by any thinking person, as justification for condemming high school level vocational education.

Second, I have seen no evidence, based on data collected from matched samples of vocational education students compared with academic students (where matching has been carried out using ability level, geographic factors, and socioeconomic status) that showed vocational education students to have fared worse than academic students. Neither have I seen such evidence presented under circumstances where cultural barriers to

employment for vocational education students have been part of the research design.

For all these reasons, it seems to me this is a most damaging charge to level based on what, essentially, is a review of the literature conducted by one person. In operating career education programs, we have seen many youth who, had they not had the benefit of vocational education, not only would have had great difficulty finding any job but who, in addition, would have had great difficulty even finishing high school. I am sure that practicing vocational educators could, if they were asked to do so, come up with literally thousands of examples bearing out this point.

Charge 4: Vocational Education is Too Narrow in Scope

The specific accusation made here is stated, by O'Toole, as follows:

> "...several critics have demonstrated that the skills taught in vocational programs are too narrow for a fast-changing world of work - the skills taught are often obsolete before they are ever used."

From a career education standpoint, several replies must be made to this charge. First, in supporting vocational education, those of us in career education have never operated under an assumption that the skills learned will be sufficient for the entire occupational life of the individual. Rather, we have counted on vocational education to provide its students with skills sufficient to allow them to enter the world of paid employment. It is essential that one be able to get into the system before one can possibly move up. Given an option of having, or failing to

have, an entry level vocational skill, we have simply said that it seems better that youth have some skill rather than none.

Second, it will be apparent, to any who view current relationships between career education and vocational education, that, increasingly, vocational skill training is being provided in broad vocational areas, not in only one possible occupation. The philosophy of vocational education has supported this concept for many years now and its operational programs have illustrated it. It would, it seems to me, behoove those who want to criticize vocational education before drawing their conclusions.

Finally, it is simply a gross exaggeration to assert that the skills given vocational education students "are often obsolete before they are ever used." With all the talk about rapidity of occupational change, it seems obvious that such change is not <u>that</u> rapid. Sar Levitan's recent book, <u>Work is Here to Stay, Alas!</u> provides good data to verify this point.

<u>Charge 5: Vocational Grads are Too Narrowly Trained to be Upgraded on the Job</u>

> "...because vocational graduates have been trained so narrowly and illiberally, there is no base for employers to build on with continuing, on-the-job training."

Again, we find a charge which, when subjected to realities of operation in vocational education programs, simply cannot be substantiated. In the first place, vocational education students are exposed to the same basic academic skills required for adaptability as all other students during the elementary and junior high school years. The curriculum is not different for prospective vocational education students at these levels. True, like many other students, some vocational education students have

failed to acquire a reasonable level of proficiency in the basic academic skills. That is why vocational educators have joined the career education team in developing and operating career awareness programs in elementary schools and career exploration programs in junior high schools.

Second, I know of no vocational high school that is devoid of any emphasis on academic or general liberal education. Typically, not over half of any school day is devoted strictly to vocational education. The system of vocational education, in America, has not been established in ways that prevent vocational education students from taking courses in general education. Common practice is quite the opposite.

Third, vocational education has never operated as part of the required curriculum in the American high school. On the contrary, the "required" part has always been general education courses and vocational education courses have always operated as electives. To whatever extent general education can be said to be valuable in providing youth with the academic skills of adaptability, it is obvious that those advantages have not been denied to students enrolled in vocational education.

On at least these three bases, O'Toole's contention here must be denied and regarded as refuted.

Charge 6: Vocational Grads are Trained in the Wrong Fields

The sixth charge seems particularly strange to me. In O'Toole's words, the charge is stated as follows:

"...vocational graduates are often trained for jobs that don't exist. Moreover, such training is concentrated in declining fields (such as

agriculture) and in fields of questionable merit (home economics), while the fast-growing world of white-collar, service employment is completely ignored."

A number of sub-charges are included in this rather sweeping indictment. First, it should be clearly stated that vocational education has not attempted to prepare students for specific jobs, but rather for multiple opportunities for entry into the world of paid employment. It would be much more proper, from a career education viewpoint, to contend that vocational education prepares its students for work than to limit the goals of vocational education to simply job preparation.

Second, the direct criticism of vocational agriculture here upsets me greatly. From a career education standpoint, I have often said that I wish all senior high school teachers had the same kinds of opportunities to participate in career education that are made available to teachers of vocational agriculture. Where else do we find teachers with opportunities to: (a) be on 12 month contracts; (b) visit in pupils' homes as part of their regular job duties; and (c) help students engage in individualized work experience projects that emphasize initiative, individual responsibility, and the basic elements in the free enterprise system? Where else do we find a part of education that has a government-sponsored counterpart in the business-labor-industry community? Where else do we see such a direct emphasis on teaching youth general career skills of adaptability that will be useful in a wide variety of occupational areas? In all these ways, it seems to me, from the standpoint of career education,

vocational agriculture represents extremely valuable background for helping youth acquire basic vocational skills that can be useful in a very wide variety of occupational pursuits. It certainly does not deserve to be attacked simply because specific employment directly in agriculture is still slowly declining.

Third, I am at least as upset with O'Toole's contention that home economics is of "questionable merit." From a career education viewpoint, it is doubtful that any part of vocational education has more merit. I say this, not only from the viewpoint of gainful home economics, but also from the viewpoint of the entire field of home economics. Unless the home and family structure receives an increased and more dedicated emphasis as part of American education, our entire society will suffer. Career education's goals depend, on their success, very much on emphasizing the home as a work place for all family members, on parental attitudes towards themselves and toward their children, on productive use of leisure time, and on consumer education. In all these ways, home economics is of great - not "questionable" - merit and worth.

Charge 7: Vocational Education Doesn't Appeal to Today's Youth

Perhaps the strangest, and most difficult to understand, charge leveled by O'Toole is stated in the following words:

> "...vocational education cannot be viewed as compatible with the new work values of the current generation."

It is difficult to understand how O'Toole could have arrived at such a conclusion when, only one page earlier in his monograph, he pointed, with

some alarm, to the rapid increase in enrollments in vocational education. Certainly, no one has, in any way, forced students to enroll in vocational education. I fail to see how one can contend it has no appeal to the current generation when so many of that generation are seeking to enroll in vocational education programs.

Second, almost all of the recent literature I have been reading in education seems to be stressing a demand, on the part of youth, for closer and more direct relationships between education and work. Opinion polls of youth would seem to indicate that youth are rejecting an "education for education's sake" emphasis and demanding that their education have more relevance and applicability to the work they will do when they first leave the system of formal education. I don't see youth rejecting work. Rather, it seems to me they are crying for moire meaning and meaningfulness in their work. Certainly, vocational education is not moving in ways that would contradict this kind of work value.

Concluding Statement

In making these statements, I, in no way, mean to imply that vocational education represents the only - nor necessarily the most potentially effective - means available to America for solving problems of the underemployed and the unemployed. There are several of O'Toole's major suggestions for change that appeal to me. I am simply trying to say that, in my opinion, any long-run strategy for solving the education/work dilemma in general - or the problems of the underemployed in particular - that ignores or fails to take full advantage of vocational education

will be both unwise and unproductive. Vocational education is not the sole answer, but it must certainly be included among the national strategies we adopt for solving these various serious problems.

Finally, I hope these remarks have helped clarify the crucial importance I attach to vocational education as an essential element in a total career education strategy. We will never make the career education concept an operational reality unless all concerned with this movement recognize and embrace the goals and objectives of vocational education.

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